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Operation Splinter Factor

Sir, Neil Ascherson's review of my book *Operation Splinter Factor* (NS 16 August) betrays a fundamental misunderstanding about what it is really all about. Though, as author, I must take the fullest responsibility for that, it is noteworthy that of all those who have reviewed the book both here and in America he appears to be alone in failing to grasp the central message. He declares:

... to suppose that a large body of educated and experienced men some of whom had direct knowledge of Eastern Europe could seriously imagine that the patriotic martyrdom of a communist generation on charges shamelessly fabricated by the agents of the Soviet oppressor would discredit the victims rather than bring them sympathy - this sticks in the craw.

I was, of course, saying the complete reverse. This 'large body of educated and experienced men' wished as much sympathy as possible to be exerted on behalf of the victims of the purges provided, of course, they were not still around to be the direct beneficiaries of it.

'Operation Splinter Factor' employed all the arts of the black propagandist by first assisting in the destruction of a class of people and then aiding their eventual beatification. The operation failed not because it lacked sophistication but in the final analysis because the Western powers were not prepared to match the physical force employed by the Soviet Union to squash the counter-revolutionary drive which partly derived from it.

I am sorry that Mr Ascherson should find such a concept confusing though the fact that he does so assists me in seeing why Eastern European governments should be so easily taken in by it. But then a journalist who seems to believe, despite all evidence to the contrary, that all ex-Expressmen come from a definable political mould (try that out on Tom Driberg), is clearly the same man who, assuming the role of a modern historian, believes that the CIA lacked the 'brains and ability' to mount an operation of this depth and magnitude.

In each case, prejudice is shown to cloud the mind and judgment of what is a fine intellect. But then we all know Neil Ascherson, don't we?

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NEAL ASCHERSON writes: Mr Steven now tells us that the CIA wanted to rouse sympathy for the purged victims. On page 146 he wrote the passage: 'Dulles wished to leave Eastern Europe devoid of hope . . . Kostov and Gomulka destroyed that possibility by giving people enough hope so they could endure.' But what, in a detail, if we all know Neil Ascherson but cannot spell his name right?